



Things to Ponder

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Fourth Watch of the Night

By Rev. Msgr. Kevin T. Hart

Today's Gospel (Matthew 14:22-33) relates the story of Jesus walking on the water and His invitation to Peter to join Him. This incident immediately follows Jesus' multiplication of the loaves and fish, when the crowds became rather unruly, trying to make Jesus king, and thus starting an insurrection. Jesus tells His disciples to quickly get in the boat and hightail it out of there. He would walk around the lake in prayer and join them on the other side.

When the disciples got into the boat they were already in a very agitated state. After an arduous night of rowing against a strong headwind, Matthew is careful to note that it was now the fourth watch of the night. In ancient times the night was divided into four watches: 6 p.m. to 9 p.m., 9 p.m. to 12 midnight; midnight to 3 a.m., and 3 a.m. to 6 a.m. The last watch began when the night was at its darkest, after the setting of the moon. Seasoned sailors regarded the fourth watch as rather uneasy, even frightening. "You are surrounded by dark water," relates a modern day sailor, "and if there is no moon you begin to imagine rocks rising up in front of you, or even phantom ships. Waves sound like the whispers of people or the breathing of some huge aquatic creature. Then you realize how much you are alone out there, and you realize how many ways there are to die."

Now to top it all off, a sudden storm arises, for which Lake Gennesaret is notorious. Agitated at the events surrounding the multiplication of the loaves and fish, with a storm going on that tossed the boat about, and being in the fourth watch of the night, we can only imagine the fear and terror they were experiencing. And this is the state they were in when they see Jesus walking on the water. "It is a ghost," they cried out, a ghost familiar to seamen on the fourth watch.

Recognizing that it is no ghost, but Jesus Himself, Peter throws himself into the lake, and begins walking toward Jesus. As long as he kept his eyes fixed firmly on the Lord, he continued to walk on the water. But when he turned his gaze from the Lord, looked at his feet and noticed how rough the water was surrounding him, he lives up to the meaning of his name and immediately begins to sink like a rock into the sea. Jesus stretches out His arm, and hoists Peter to safety. The wind dies down; the lake is calm;

the sun begins to rise; Jesus was in the boat with them. The fear and terror of the night is over.

We all experience rough waters, our own "fourth watch of the night." We can identify with the fear of Peter and the other disciples in our own experiences of feeling lost, hopeless and alone when life seems overwhelming. With homes foreclosed and jobs lost, with our country's involvement in wars and conflict all over the globe, with the threat of nuclear disaster, with a struggling economy, with serious health and family issues, in contemplating an unknown future, fear can sometimes claim our reason, our peace, our hope. Like Elijah in our first reading (1 Kings 19:9a, 11-13a), we may be inclined to flee to the desert. Like Peter, we may feel that we are drowning in a dangerous sea. It is in that moment when the assurance of God's presence invites us to make the move from fear to faith.

Peter didn't drown when he began to sink, and neither will we if we do what Peter did in the Gospel. We turn our gaze back to Jesus and call out for help. We turn to Jesus in prayer. Like Elijah we need to spend some time in quiet so we can hear the voice of the Lord, sometimes as quiet as a gentle breeze. Today's Gospel reminds us of three important things in our striving to follow Him across the stormy seas of today's world. We need to fix our gaze firmly and constantly on Him. We cannot let ourselves become distracted or overwhelmed by the stormy world. And when we start to sink, we turn to Him and repeat the words which kept Peter from drowning: "Lord, save me." And He will.

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